

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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A communal project usually measures its success in terms of unanimity, but some occasions seem to demand more inventive techniques.



JOE DALEY, the special investigator from the governor's office, got right to the point. "Sheriff, yesterday afternoon a mob of hooded men dragged a woman from this jail and hanged her by the neck until she was dead. What were you doing while all this was happening?"

EVERYBODY EXCEPT WILBUR

"Nothing," I said. "My hand was caught in the Coca Cola machine in the back of Wilbur Frank's store." My eyes drifted to the window and the big oak near Charley's Garage. "I still don't believe there was any lynching. Don't see anybody hanging there now."

Daley's neck got a little red. "After it was all over, they cut down her body and carried it away."

"Nobody found it yet?"

"No. They probably buried her somewhere in the hills."

I put tobacco into my pipe. "Then you don't rightly have proof that there was a lynching here at all, do you? Like I read somewhere, you need to have the *corpus delicti* or you can't prove that anybody is dead."

Daley smiled for the first time since he'd come to town. "You may know something about the law, Sheriff, but not enough. We don't need a body. We don't even need a piece of the body. All we need is proof that the victim existed and that she was murdered. What was the name of the woman in your jail?"

My eyes went to the window again. "Never locked up a woman in my life."

Daley's eyes narrowed. "Are you telling me that there *wasn't* any woman locked up in your jail

yesterday? Not one, at any time?"

"That's right," I said. "That's what I'm telling you."

He stared at me for a little while. "This is quite a town. Didn't you good people lynch a woman about seventy-five years ago?"

I nodded. "She stole a horse. Best harness racer in the county. For that time, at least."

Yesterday afternoon—after I got my hand out of the coke machine—I went to the front of Wilbur Frank's store and looked down the road. I didn't see anything that time either. Not a soul on the street and nobody hanging from the oak tree.

But Wilbur still claimed that he'd seen a lynching and carried on about it. I tried to soothe him, but he lost his temper and phoned the state troopers.

The first of them got here in about fifteen minutes and it wasn't long after that before the whole town was swarming with uniforms and people asking questions.

And then this morning Joe Daley came down from the state capitol with a lot of people from his office.

Daley's name gets in the papers a lot now that the Governor announced he's retiring, and it looks like Daley will probably get the party's nomination for that job at the next convention. At least he's the front runner ever since some-

body found out that State Senator Homer Wright's been using those convicts to build swimming pools for his friends.

Daley still studied me. "I suppose you've got a lot of relatives in this town?"

"Well, now," I said. "I guess just about everybody's related to everybody else here. Except for Wilbur Frank. He's from Marydale and been here only a couple of years."

The door opened and a trooper sergeant came in. He looked tired. "It's still no use. Not a soul in town has anything to say."

Daley wouldn't accept that. "*Somebody* besides Wilbur Frank must have seen that lynching." He paced back and forth a couple of times. "What about the kids? Did you question any of them?"

The sergeant sighed. "They were all gone when it happened. There's no school here, so a bus picks them up in the morning and takes them to the consolidated school over in Marydale. They don't get back home until after five."

Daley brushed that aside. "I mean the *real* kids. The little ones under seven or so. They must have seen what happened, and children that age can't help but talk. Even if their parents tell them not to."

The sergeant didn't look happy. "They were all at the picnic."

Daley blinked. "Picnic? What picnic?"

The sergeant was definitely uncomfortable. "It seems that all the women folk of this town—every blessed one of them—decided on a picnic yesterday afternoon. They packed up the kids and went off to Cotter's Creek. Didn't get back until after five."

That was a little too much for Daley. "Every one of them? What were they celebrating? John Wilkes Booth day?"

"No, sir," I said. "Folks around here was Unionist in sentiment during the war. I guess it was just a nice day and everybody felt like picnicking. The women folks, at least."

Daley turned abruptly to one of his assistants. "I want the crime lab to send down the polygraph machine right away."

I looked at my watch and then put it back. "If nobody's got objections, I think I'll go over to Fred Jackson's place for a cup of coffee."

Daley hesitated a second, but then shrugged. "Go ahead. But I'll talk to you again later."

When I stepped outside of the jailhouse, there were probably a hundred reporters and photographers waiting. I got my picture taken and some of the latecomers asked if I wouldn't pose again with

my hand caught in Wilbur Frank's coke machine. I promised I'd be over there later, but first I'd have to get coffee and something to eat.

The whole town was full of cars and it didn't seem like all of them belonged to the police or the reporters. Tourists, I guess.

Fred's cafe was packed too. Usually he can handle all of his business alone and still have plenty of time for reading the newspapers, but now I noticed that he'd hired the Jenkins girls and Susie Dibbler and they all looked plenty busy.

I sidled around the customers and went back into the room where Fred sleeps.

Fred left the counter and joined me half a minute later. He closed the door behind him. "How are things going?"

I looked over the black eye he was sporting. "Pretty good, so far." There was a pot of coffee on a hot plate and I helped myself. "Mr. Daley is going to bring one of those lie detector machines into town."

Fred looked worried.

I put sugar into my cup. "Now this contraption is a mighty delicate thing, Fred. So I want you to cooperate. When the man who runs it asks you questions, you just relax and say what comes to your mind. Don't squooch up your toes inside your shoes when he's asking something important or think about

anything exciting. Don't even fidget or cough, because that might throw all them graphs and charts way off."

Fred handed me the cream. "I'll pass the word on to everybody I see."

There seemed to be a little more commotion than usual outside the building and so Fred went to the window. "State Senator Homer Wright's car just pulled into town. What does he want to do, drive another nail into the coffin?"

I tasted the coffee. "Can't never tell, Fred. But I suspicion that if Daley says black, Homer Wright has just got to say white. Just on general principles, and politics being what it is."

I finished the coffee and went outside.

Some of the home folks must have identified Homer to the reporters from out of state, because he had a small group around him.

The senator is a hefty man and he wore his usual white linen suit and broad-brimmed hat. "I *know* these people," he was saying. "They're *my* people and I know that they would never lynch anyone, let alone a woman."

One of the reporters grinned. "But they did seventy-five years ago."

The senator frowned. "That, sir, was in another time, and be-

sides, she stole a horse. But this is the twentieth century and the people of this state are as aware of it as any others in the good old fifty. And I am here today to *defend* them against the persecution of those who were not born here and might not understand their ways."

I guess he must have meant Joe Daley, who was born in Wisconsin. Of course his folks brought him to this state when he was two years old, but I understand that the first two years of a person's life are mighty important and can sort of shape a man.

The senator held up his hands for a little more attention. "These good people believe in liberty and justice. After all, their ancestors invented the Magna Carta and government of the people, for the people, and by the people."

He went on like that for quite a spell. I noticed that some of the reporters got restless and wandered away, but he held the town folks and got applauded every now and then.

When he finished, I went on to Wilbur Frank's store and, after I had my picture taken at the coke machine, I took a look at some of the capitol newspapers on Wilbur's rack.

According to the Chronicle, what happened here was a shame and a

disgrace to the state and the nation, especially since it was a woman. The editorial page promised that the state would definitely do something about it and the United States Attorney General could keep his marshals in Washington. The Chronicle is pulling for Daley to be the next governor.

On the other hand, the Journal had it figured that everybody ought to go cautious and keep their heads. Don't lynch the lynchers. *If* there was a lynching. It also mentioned that so far it was just one man's word against that of a whole town and that ought to carry some weight.

The Journal went on to say that Daley was just trying to grab himself a lot of publicity when he really should be explaining how come his wife was drawing regular state pay as his secretary, when she couldn't type or take shorthand and spent six months of the year in Florida.

I understand that State Senator Homer Wright owns part of the Journal.

The lie detector machine came the next morning and every man in town got a chance at it. Including me.

A man by the name of Parker ran the thing and he told me to stop biting my pipe so much. So I stopped, but that made me uncom-

fortable and I developed an itch on my knee and had to scratch it when he asked me if I really got my hand caught in the coke machine.

I was enjoying Saturday evening with Jim Barker, our mayor, and his house guest, Senator Homer Wright, when a state trooper knocked on the door and said that Daley wanted to see me at the jailhouse and right away.

I picked up my hat. "Senator, would you like to come along and see what the inside of a jail looks like?"

Maybe I used the wrong words, because he glared at me for a second, but then he got to his feet. "Don't mind if I do."

When we got to the jailhouse, Parker was talking to Daley. "I've never seen such disordered results or heard so much coughing in my entire career. I can't say anything definite about anyone in town, except for one person."

Daley was all attention. "Who's that?"

"Wilbur Frank," Parker said. "He's telling the truth."

Daley smiled slightly and turned to me. "Sheriff, our lab technicians went over that oak tree in front of Charley's Garage. They recovered rope fibers from the first branch."

I rubbed my jaw. "I seem to

remember that some of Charley's kids hung up a swing on that particular limb not so long ago."

Daley kept smiling. "Who was the last person you had in this jail, Sheriff?"

I thought about it. "I guess that would be Lew Worley. He had a few too many about a month ago and his wife told me to come and get him. I locked him up for the night. In the morning he was sober and sorry, so I let him go."

Daley seemed to nod. "When you put people in this jail, Sheriff, you make a note of it, don't you? I mean you write their names in a book or something?"

"Sure. I try to be official."

Daley seemed to produce my ledger from out of the air and he waved it almost like a flag. "Is this where you enter their names?"

"That's right."

He opened the book. "I don't see Lew Worley's name down here."

My pipe was out, so I started looking for matches.

"As a matter of fact," Daley said, "the last entry—on the bottom line of this page—concerns one Clark Haskins."

"Clark got drunk too," I said. "I locked him up for one night."

Daley put the open ledger in front of me and pointed. "See this bit of paper at the binding? It looks as though somebody tore out the

next page, doesn't it? Look here!"

I found my matches and worked at getting my pipe going again.

"There is a page missing," Daley said. "And I've had our crime lab go over this ledger. My men were able to bring out the impression on the blank page following—impressions made when some one wrote on that missing page."

He waited a few seconds, studying me, and then went on. "We found a number of names, including that of Lew Worley. But his name wasn't the *last* name. There was one more after his."

Daley leaned closer. "Sheriff, who was Ellie May Linton?"

I said nothing.

Daley smiled thinly. "I ask you once again, Sheriff, did you or did you not book an Ellie May Linton on the 20th of this month?"

Senator Homer Wright got to his feet. "I think perhaps the sheriff should speak through an attorney and I, for one, am willing to act in that capacity, as I am to defend the rights of any others who may need help in their time of need. I want them to know that I will not flinch before the mass hysteria of hostile outsiders."

Daley seemed to have trouble restraining himself. He took a deep breath and spoke to one of the troopers. "Get Wilbur Frank. I want the good honest senator to

hear the story direct from the horse's mouth."

Wilbur Frank was brought in ten minutes later and he made himself comfortable in a chair.

He got right to it. "Well, sir, it was about two-thirty in the afternoon. There wasn't nobody in the store but me and the sheriff and he wasn't buying nothing. Just sitting there and breathing free air. And then I heard this yelling outside. So I went to the front of the store and looked out. And here was this bunch of men down at the jailhouse. They was all wearing burlap bags over their heads and most of them was carrying guns."

"How far is the jailhouse from your store?"

"About two hundred yards. And I seen some of them drag this woman out of the jailhouse and she was fighting pretty furious. Even knocked one of them down, from what I seen."

"When you saw what was happening, what did you do?"

"I turned right around and hollered to the sheriff."

"And what was *he* doing?"

"He was at the back of the store trying to get his hand out of the coke machine."

I cleared my throat. "I put in this nickel and nothing came out. So I thought something must be jammed. I reached into that hole

and somehow my hand got stuck."

"Never mind," Daley snapped. "Mr. Frank, will you please continue."

Wilbur did. "So I tried to help the sheriff get his hand out of the machine, but he told me to leave him alone, he'd get loose by himself."

"And then?"

"I went back to the window. It kind of drew me, you know. And this mob dragged this woman over to the tree and strung her up."

"And all this time the sheriff still had his hand caught in the machine?"

"That's right."

Daley smiled grimly in my direction before he got back to Wilbur. "Go on."

"Well, they let her hang there—until they were sure she was dead, I guess—and then they cut her down and carried her body away. I lost sight of them when they passed Mike Mosely's house."

"Did you recognize anybody?"



"No. Like I said, they was all wearing those bags over their heads."

"Did the sheriff finally get his hand out of the coke machine?"

"Yep. Right after I told him that they had disappeared. And he went to the window and he said he didn't see a blamed thing. He asked me if he could smell my breath."

"That made you angry?"

"Damn right," Wilbur snapped. "I don't drink. And besides, I can hold the stuff when I do. So I grabbed the phone and called the state troopers."

"Mr. Frank," Daley said. "What do you know about an Ellie May Linton?"

Wilbur gave it thought. "Never heard of her. But I don't know everybody around here yet."

Senator Homer Wright got to his feet. "Do you mind if I ask Mr. Frank a few questions?"

Daley was gracious about it. "Go right ahead, Senator."

The Senator rolled his thumbs along his suspenders. "Mr. Frank, while this alleged lynching was taking place, what did *you* do? Besides watching, I mean. Did you try to stop them?"

Wilbur bristled. "Stop them? What in the world could I do about it, Senator? Here was this mob with guns and me alone. They might of took it into their heads

to lynch me too, once they tasted blood, so to speak. Just about everybody in town owes me money."

The Senator stretched the suspenders again. "You say the victim fought furiously until they strung her up?"

"Well . . . not exactly. I guess she fainted before they actually put the noose around her neck."

"Fainted?"

Wilbur nodded. "She was fighting like a wildcat until they got to the meeting house. When they came in sight again they was carrying her. They took her to the tree, like I said, and strung her up."

The Senator looked thoughtful. "When she was strung up, did she ah . . . kick . . . or twitch?"

"No," Wilbur said. "She just hung there like a rag doll."

The Senator raised an eyebrow. "Like a *rag* doll?"

"That's right," Wilbur said.

There was a spell of quiet thinking in the room and then the Senator turned to me. "Sheriff, the woman who was lynched here seventy-five years ago? What was her name?"

"Ellie May Linton," I said.

Now Wilbur wasn't seeing ghosts.

What I mean is that here's our little town going downhill and folks drifting away. Not because they want to, but because they got to go

somewhere in order to earn a living.

And then I read about this town of Tombstone in Arizona and what they managed to do with the shooting at the O.K. Corral way back in 1881. Every year, Tombstone re-enacts the whole thing and that draws thousands of tourists. And tourists spend money, and that keeps the economy healthy.

So I got to thinking about that woman who got herself lynched here back in 1888. Now a lot of towns in the United States can claim to have lynched a man, but how many can say that they lynched a woman? You got to admit that's pretty unique. As far as I was able to find out, there's only one little place in Texas that can make the same claim and I thought we'd better get things moving before Texas did.

Now if we just announced that we were going to re-enact the lynching every year, the best we could hope for might be to draw a few folks from Marydale and Black Creek Falls and places like that. We wanted to get the attention of the entire state. The whole

doggoned country too, if we could.

It took some planning, but every adult in town was in on it, except for Wilbur Frank. We wanted a witness who could swear that he saw a real lynching and couldn't be talked out of it. Not even by a lie detector.

Susie Dibbler played the part of Ellie May Linton and she did a fine job, even if she did get a little excited and give Fred that black eye. She was carried out of the jailhouse fighting and kicking and, when they got her behind the meeting house, the boys switched to the dummy and strung that up.

I understand that Joe Daley's withdrawn his name from the gubernatorial race. Maybe he'll have better luck ten or fifteen years from now when people stop laughing at what a little town did to him.

And it looks like we're going to get ourselves a big free swimming pool. At least that's what our future governor, Homer Wright, promised me when I let him in on our town's little secret before it happened.

